

**Voluntary Organisations
&
Militancy**

A Personal Account

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Mr. Sanjoy Ghose

*was writing this article just before he was abducted
on 4th July 97*

Voluntary Organisations and Militancy: A personal Account

Sanjay Ghose, development worker with experience in Rajasthan, recounts the struggle his colleagues are facing from the underground on a remote river island in Assam, and draws lessons for the future.

In April 1996, a group of seven development workers moved to Jorhat, in Assam. Three of us had worked together earlier in Urmul, a voluntary organisation in western Rajasthan; of the other four, one was from Arunachal Pradesh, another from Nagaland, a third although originally from Himachal Pradesh, had been living and working in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh for the last two years; and the fourth was an Indian of Chinese origin from Bangalore, with a background of social work. Before the move all of us had spent time in doing a detailed recce of the place, in different capacities: I had organised workshops for development workers and travelled in all the North Eastern states; Sumita was the link person for the eastern and north eastern region for the Beijing conference, and her work had brought her here often; and Sunil had worked as a doctor with the Army in Arunachal, and travelled extensively there.

The idea behind our move was based on our analysis of voluntary action in the region. We felt that the present context of voluntary action was too rooted in the charity mode and had not developed to the extent of allowing it to become a platform for self-expression. If youth could be involved in a full time way in this, it may be possible to find solutions to some of the endemic problems, using the democratic space that already existed, but which had not been explored sufficiently. Small facts led us to this kind of analysis: there was little protest about the flagrant deforestation in the region, and if the Supreme Court ban finally did get enforced, it was on the strength of litigation filed outside; in spite of the number of malaria deaths every year, there is little by way of concerted voluntary action to research, understand and evolve solutions; while the region was abundant in natural resources, there was little by way of value addition and employment; though weaving and bamboo and cane craft were household skills, there had been few attempts to develop markets outside that could increase returns to producers.

Yet there were powerful underground movements, a dynamic student force, high levels of literacy, strong community norms and respect for traditional culture, and on the whole better status of women - all possible ingredients for a transformation of the system.

It is not that voluntary action does not exist in the North East: quite the contrary. In fact most of the group formation for social development activities is totally voluntary, and often membership-based. Powerful

examples exist in the women's organisations - the Meira Peibis in Manipur; the Naga Mother's Association in Nagaland; as well as the Young Mizo Association in Mizoram, and the innumerable youth clubs and Mahila Samities all over the region. The context of voluntary action though is quite different. Virtually all of it is linked to notions of charity and doing good, and since there is little institutional continuity or stability (organisations come together around issues, and festivals, rather than working continuously on one area). The only "sustained" voluntary action - if one could term it that - is that of the insurgent groups. Interestingly, many of these groups are now organising around notions of redistribution, and equity: autonomy or independence is not sufficient to create a classless society, and the underpinnings of these revolutionary groups is communist.

Our idea of working in the North East was to open up the space for voluntary action in society. Perhaps through a process of strengthening and supporting grassroots groups, and developing support institutions, we would be able to engender a process in which needs of the people were met, as well as provide opportunities for young people to experiment with forms of constructive dissent - raising questions of State and society, as well as coming up with some answers.

We were acutely aware of the fact that our experience in the past had been in Rajasthan, and it would be completely inappropriate to develop "training" programmes without understanding the local situation and context better. We also needed to earn our spurs here, actually demonstrate how community development processes could be initiated. Only if we could show something in a practical way, would we have the credibility to get people to accept what we were saying.

We decided to work on the island of Majuli. It was the largest river island in the world, the spiritual centre of Assam, yet was one of the most backward and underdeveloped pockets in the State. It was close to Jorhat, but nearly inaccessible, and faced severe problems during the floods. It was a majority tribal population, and had other communities as well, a sort of microcosm of the North Eastern situation. There was little else by way of organised voluntary action, and it would be easier to measure impact.

Majuli is a beautiful place. Now in the season before the floods, you can see the raindrops bounce off the fast flowing Brahmaputra; the purple flowers of the azhar are in full bloom. Taking the ferry upstream is a Zen-like experience, time passing with the illusion of movement.

We started work in Majuli in April 1996. When we came, we did not know the language, the culture, the problems. So leave alone implementing a development plan, we didn't even have that basic information to prepare a blueprint for action. That was how we had planned it actually. We were supported with individual fellowships, and small core grant, and resolved to spend the first year just getting to know the place and the people, and understanding the way the system was playing itself out. It was a luxury we had not been able to afford ourselves when we started work

in Rajasthan twelve years ago, and we had paid the price for that haste and arrogance.

We spent the first three months living in people's houses, all over the island. We split up to cover the whole island, picking remote hamlets and people of all backgrounds - tribal farmers, Scheduled Caste fisher people, school teachers - and gradually came to be accepted as part of the local scene in Majuli.

We had one full time local volunteer, Bhagirath Das. We came across him by chance. He was a nephew of Anando Hazarika, our first contact in Majuli. Anando is a Professor of Geography in the local Majuli college. He was active in the AASU student movement in the early 1980s, but since then has stayed away from most of the people who joined us were women, and from the Scheduled Caste or Tribe community.

Our well laid plans for research were however put on hold by an Act of God - in August, Majuli experienced the worst flood in living memory. Many parts of the island were inundated. Thousands of people moved to the embankments and the dikes to escape from the water.

For our group it was a difficult decision. We had resolved not to get involved in any kind of "development" programme while we were still understanding the area and the people. All along we had been answering the question, what exactly are you all planning to do with a cryptic, don't know yet, depends on what our understanding brings out, and what kind of partnership we can build with local people. Yet if we were to just watch while the flood played itself out, it would be cruel, researching while Majuli drowns.

Yet what could we do ? We couldn't get into food distribution, because that would go against our basic tenet of promoting self-reliance, and even if we wanted to, just the sheer logistics of getting ration across to 150,000 people was going to be too time consuming and expensive. We thought about trying to provide some kind of temporary shelters, but again the scale and management of that would be too big for us at this stage. Sorting through alternatives, we finally decided on a mix of two programmes - making clean drinking water available, in the form of shallow tube wells to displaced communities, and running a mobile medical camp service. We decided to work through existing organisations on the island - the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) and the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chattra Parishad (AJYCP). The arrangement had its ups and downs, but we managed in the end to reach sixty communities, signing agreements for the maintenance of the wells with every village.

One minor problem was with the "Anchalik President" of AASU (one of the local units) of Bongaon, called Bubul Hathimota. Although we had an agreed list of villages, he kept a tube well for himself. We thought the best way to deal with it was to make the information public, and we published the list of all the tube well sites in the next issue of Dweep-Alok, including his. This didn't exactly endear us to him, and we made our first powerful enemy in Bongaon.

Again during the flood, we were confronted with an apathetic administration - people who had sheltered themselves from the problems of the poor, and were busy sitting in their offices (under water) signing papers and generally lording it over. We took up the issue and wrote critically in the local press about the attitude of these persons. The article although in an English daily, created a stir in Majuli, since it was the first time that some kind of public accountability was being demanded. The two singled out for criticism (by name) were AC Dutta, the then Sub-Divisional Officer, and BK Bora, the then Extra Assistant Commissioner, and former BDO of Kamlabari block.

After the flood, we are involved with two small rehabilitation projects: organising credit groups of the poorest twenty women in eight villages, and helping them with a winter crop; and in one village, through a local voluntary organisation called Seuj Bandhu (Green Friends), promoting a nursery for indigenous timber species, that will give about fifteen women year-round employment. Over the next six months we worked closely with these groups, trying to understand something about how people related to each other. People within the group, and the group with the community outside.

The other outcome of our "home stays" was a newsletter - magazine in Assamese, called Dweep-Alok. We all found that there was a thirst for information, and hardly anywhere it could be accessed from. Dweep-Alok is aimed at an audience of young men and women, and has regular columns on self-employment, news about Government programmes, and how to access them, as well as case studies of how these programmes are actually working in the field. One feature that has generated a great deal of interest in a column called "prathibha", focusing on someone remarkable from Majuli. The first issue profiled a male weaver (unthinkable in these parts); the second a poet who makes a living from pushing a handcart. The response to Dweep-alok has been unprecedented, and unexpected. Coming from Rajasthan, where it was a task to even get people to read what was available, it came as a revelation how seriously the written word was treated. We also used the magazine for investigative journalism. The first issue uncovered a scam on Indira Awas Yojana in Bongaon Panchayat, where the local Panchayat President, a woman by the name of Parul Bora, had given the contract for building the houses to her son. The work was incomplete, and it featured, with photographs, in Dweep-alok. The lady in question was livid, and wrote a nasty letter to the editor, but when we met and explained that it was nothing personal, just looking at how the system could be improved, she cooled down a bit. But obviously the wound ranked, as later developments showed. Second enemy in Bongaon.

We had another moment of tension with the inaugural issue of Dweep-Alok. We carried an interview of the local MLA, Karuna Datta, where we quoted him as saying, "I generally approve of voluntary organisations, but sometimes I've seen say in the case of AASU and AJYCP, that the

leaders of the movement betray their cause." It seemed harmless and innocuous enough to us, but the Assamese word (prabanchana) is equivalent to "traitor", and to use that epithet for an organisation that was one of his foremost campaigners during the elections ("non-political student union" notwithstanding) was asking for trouble. The local unit of AASU asked us to retract the statement, or else prove that he had in fact said it. And in the meantime, as expected, he flatly refused to admit that he had used that word ("and if at all I did, it was in a different context"). Since we had no recorded evidence, we withdrew copies of the magazine, reprinted one page, and then distributed it, after omitting the offending word! But some of the mud stuck. We were accused of trying to foment divisions between the "party" (AGP) and the students (AASU), and of trying to weaken AASU's hold on people. Over time some of the bitterness disappeared, but obviously the seeds remained.

Shortly after we started work (while we were staying in people's houses, before the floods), we had our first encounter with ULFA. It was an open door meeting at which four team members were present, two ULFA cadres, and some miscellaneous hangers-on from the village. It took place in the house of Bhola Boniya, the farmer in whose house I was staying as part of my home-stay period. It was hardly a dialogue. They were carrying weapons openly. More a harangue against the Indian State, and the low mentality of the people of Majuli (for not realising this fact and rebelling against it). We were told that we could continue our work, but that we would be watched. They said that we should set up our office in Bongaon, where they had their base, but we politely declined. The location we had already selected (Kamlabari) was well connected with the mainland, and from the logistics point of view, much better situated. The person who was conducting the dialogue with us was Phatik Hathimota, cousin of Babul - but this was before the flood, before we linked up with AASU for the tube well programme.

In spite of these handicaps though (or perhaps because of them) we managed to get a pulse of the local community, and help work on few action programmes together. The most memorable of these has been the stand taken by the community of prevent erosion of the island. More than 30,000 man-days of labour (mostly woman-days, in fact) were contributed, and an experimental stretch of 1.7 kilometers has been protected. There is little guarantee of it surviving even the first flood season, but it has demonstrated how communities can be mobilised to take matters into their own hand. This of course has had other implications that we didn't realise. For one, it alienated us from a powerful contractor lobby, who have been skimming the fat off the Government for ever. They saw us as a serious threat: if all works would be carried out in this manner, it would mean the loss of livelihood (lifestyles, more like it) for this class. First they lost commissions in the tube well installation, which was done at community cost; then the erosion work. Where would this lead? The second group it alienated us from was ULFA, who say a real threat in the creation of an alternate

mass base. They have been able to do little over the last fifteen years, but argue that "things will be better in our own country." They see all work within the system as somehow accepting the dominance of the Indian State, and would rather not have anything to do with it. Except extortion, which funds the revolution out of Bangkok and Geneva.

The other major event in Majuli over the last one year was the arrival and entrenchment of the Indian Army. They came for the first time in a massive overnight operation in September, and have been there ever since, in different incarnations. Currently the CRPF have a base there. The arrival of the Army in Majuli, on the heels of AVARD starting work, led to tongues wagging on the "intelligence links" that AVARD had with the Army. Three months after they came, two of our women team members watched as two drunk soldiers mercilessly beat up residents of Citadarsuk village, and since nobody else was prepared to speak against the Army - for fear of reprisal - Jennifer went to the Police Station and filed the report. That established the fact that we were on the side of the people, but circumstances were against us - we were from outside, had an office in "Delhi", could manage well in Hindi - and these facts can easily be distorted to give it sinister overtones.

In the last one year, we have also managed to expose some local bamboo craftspersons to improved production and finishing techniques, and are hoping to set up a common facility for use of machinery that the group requires. We have sent young people on training for mushroom cultivation, and at least one of them has the plan to develop it into an industry. Four persons were sent for drama training to Guwahati; of those, two were selected for further training in Delhi. Twenty women are weaving a product range for outside markets, with technical help from the National Institute of Design and the National Institute of Fashion Technology. Already their wages - which they have fixed themselves - are much higher than the amounts they earn locally. If successful, this can be replicated across the entire island, and diversified from cotton to silk as well, increasing both the employment and the value added. Dweep Alok is produced by an Information Centre, which organises regular programmes of visits and interaction with outsiders. Most recently, it played host to Rajiv Bahuguna, the adventure who is going by motorcycle from Kohima to Kashmir, to spread awareness about environmental issues. In the past interactions have been organised with Darryl D'Monte, the former editor of the Times of India; Sushil Goswami, Professor of Applied Geology at Dibrugarh University. During the last year we have also produced and broadcast four programmes on Jorhat FM radio. These programmes were on rural development, and were produced entirely by local Majuli artists.

AVARD has been pushing the case of Majuli in various national and international fora. We approached the Ministry of Human Resource Development for processing an application for listing Majuli as an endangered World Heritage Site; and have had Majuli covered on national television and in the local and national press. This has resulted

in enhanced awareness about the plight of Majuli, and will ultimately result in resources being set aside for Majuli's protection and development.

For the next year, we have already embarked on two small programmes. One involves the setting up and strengthening of twenty village libraries, which will serve as centres of dissemination and learning; the other is the selection and training of sixteen health workers who will be empowered to handle basic curative and preventive aspects of primary health care. The training of librarians is over - the purchase of books is underway. The training of village health workers is currently underway.

We were provided some resources by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust to construct a bridge. Their condition was that half of the amount should be raised from the people. We first tried to ford a river in a tribal village, threatened by erosion - but we were unable to raise the 50% contribution from the community. We then went to a different site, and the negotiations were proceeding well, but then the rains set in and we had to defer the project. These kind of programmes will help in moving people from this culture of dependence on Government, which has achieved nothing except keep thekedars employed. The floods have been a tremendous help for this class of people. They get their sanctions late, and as a result of which cannot finish their work in time. When the floods come, they can claim that everything they did was washed away, and after sharing the money, they start from scratch again the next year - predictably starting the work only in April, just before the rains.

But back to our story. On the 12th of April, Phatik, the same man who had engaged us in a "dialogue" almost a year ago, threatened to kill Bhagirath. He was instructed to "resign immediately, and spread the message to all he had come into contact with that AVARD was a RAW cover, and that AVARD had kept him on false pretences, and had misguided him and others." We left the choice to him. He opted to stay. We were in a quandary. If we called a public meeting to protest, there was every likelihood with ULFA's weapons and fear tactics, we would lose out. At the same time, not to protest at all would mean an unequivocal acceptance of their conditions, and that was equally harmful. We thought of negotiating with the Central Committee of ULFA, but held back thinking that was really our last resort: supposing the Central Committee endorsed the stand taken by the local group (quite likely) we would be forced into a situation of confrontation, which we wanted to avoid, or at least stave off for a few years.

Ultimately we just decided to move him out of Majuli, and sent him to Rajasthan. All around the news was that he had gone on a training programme.

We would keep bumping into ULFA cadres all over the island, since our areas of geographic focus were more or less the same, although for different reasons. We were going into the most interior and remote hamlets, looking for ways in which delivery systems could be built up

in those areas, and ULFA was using the same bases to hide out. Once they caught and interrogated Mallika and Jamini for over three hours. Mallika and Jamini are Mising Tribal girls from Majuli. All except one of our volunteers are from the Mising and Scheduled Caste communities, both group in which traditionally ULFA has been under represented. At the end of it, they could only say, you people are pawns in this game, and you're being used, you have no idea of the actual designs of AVARD. Even when the Army was on the island, their intelligence was so poor they would spend all their time harassing local innocents while the cadres would remain in the interior. To add fuel to the fire, after the threat to Bhagirath, the police managed to arrest Mahendra Khound, the District Commander of ULFA in Majuli, and the outfit's finance secretary.

Around the first of May, several posters appeared all over the island, accusing us of perpetrating a culture of dependence, being impostors, and destroying the local culture of Assam. These posters were unsigned. Again we were in a fix. Form the style - overnight in five locations simultaneously - we knew that it was ULFA. (Only two organisations in Majuli have that reach - AASU and ULFA). Yet the posters were not signed, which left some room for doubt.

A week after that, they began systematically interrogating people closely associated with us, and warning them to stay away. Their methods were the same - call people individually or in groups to a "safe house", and put them under pressure. The arguments they used were ingenious - that AVARD had made people contribute their labour, and then claimed the money back from DRDA; that the dresses that our women colleagues wore (salwar - kameez) was "against the culture of Assam", as was the fact that we were working with yarns procured from outside the State, and making products that were not part of the local milieu. "Women will forget how to weave and wear the mekhla-chador." Of course the RAW argument was foremost - that we were agents of the Indian State, come to spy.

Faced with this kind of an intense propaganda offensive, carried out by half - educated trigger happy kids naturally made the people scared. In one case, that of the President of the local Mahila Samiti, they said that she should disassociate, and protest against AVARD or else they would not be responsible for the safety of her children! People were so scared they were simply not willing to speak about their ordeal.

We decided to call a public meeting, and take the issue to the people.

Since the people who had been called and warned off were basically the local people who were on the Dweep-Alok editorial Board, we called an emergency meeting, to say that if people were feeling insecure and unsafe, they could disengage honourably at this stage. They suggested that this issue also be placed before the public, and if the "people" endorsed their membership on the Board, they would continue. They said that the would not speak. All except one - Dilip Phukan, a college lecturer in Naya Bazar, about forty kilometers from Kamlabari. He said,

"not only will I speak against this, but if they call a bandh on that day, I'll cycle all the way and come if I have to, but I will definitely be here." He gave us a short article on the issue, raising questions of ULFA. Basically to the effect, where are you all when the massive corruption takes place in Majuli every year ? What have you all done for the people in the last fifteen years ?

We gave the article to Janambhumi, the local newspaper published out of Jorhat (also the largest circulation Assamese newspaper in the State). They carried it, with a front page analytical piece by their correspondent, entitled, "Will the people of Majuli lose this opportunity as well ?". Those articles were a critical turning point. Letters to the editor began to come in, and more importantly, people on Majuli felt that they could speak out. The media has a powerful role to play in harnessing public opinion, and they seem to be rising to the occasion.

We decided on June 1st, the day after the Chairperson of the Assam State Human Rights Commission would be visiting Majuli. We convinced Chandra Baruah, a well known and respected citizen of the island, to Chair the meeting, and give everybody an opportunity speak. Many of our supporters came and told us in private that they had been warned off from attending the meeting, but they would come, though they would not speak.

On the 31st of May, Justice Bhargava visited the island. As he was having lunch in the Circuit House in Garamur, seven trucks and three busloads of women and children, shouting slogans against AVARD go back") arrived. There must have been over three hundred persons, a motley crew of mostly young schools students, still in half pants and obviously enjoying the day's outing. There were several journalists there, to cover the visit of the Commission. When they went up to the crowd, they were astonished that nobody seemed to know why they had come. Five people came to present a memorandum to the SDO - three women and two men. They started by talking about the problem of Majuli, the fact that so little had been done in so many years, and then switched to AVARD. Their objections were interesting. Firstly, they said, since the Tatas are funding AVARD, they must be some kind of multinational company, and their real objective here is to exploit the resources and people of Majuli. After all, the Tatas have had investments in tea gardens in Assam for decades, but they hadn't thought of coming to Majuli all these years ! Secondly, they raised the same argument about the dress that AVARD women workers wear ("inappropriate to the local culture"). Thirdly, they said that if the State Government existed for development works, what was the need for an independent voluntary organisation to come in? And why choose Majuli, when there are so many other poorer places in the country?

Although I was in the room, they refused to listen when I answered, and said that they had come to present a memorandum to the administration against us. Justice Bhargava asked them to come to the public meeting the next day and clarify these issues, to which they hemmed and hawed,

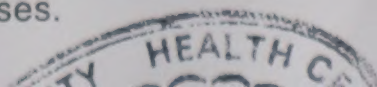
and finally said that they would send representatives. When they left the room, I met with one of the group, a young man who claimed to be the former "Cultural Secretary" of AASU. He was almost apologetic. I live in Guwahati, he told me, I had just come to the village on personal work, when last night I was asked to go with this group and make the representation. The young lady who actually stated the case against AVARD turned out to be Parul Bora's daughter, and a former (? present) ULFA cadre. The trucks and buses were all "requisitioned" by ULFA, and people were herded into vehicles at gunpoint. Ranjit Bonya, one of the "home stay" extended families of AVARD, was also on the protest rally, and said that he had been forced. People had camped in his house from four-o'clock in the morning, and refused to leave till he joined, and warned him of the consequences if he didn't. The whole event left a bad taste in the mouth. Many romantic notions of women and children protesting Army atrocities have fallen by the wayside.

The trucks and buses were all "requisitioned" by ULFA: the owners were told to produce the vehicles, and knew better than to protest. That do no buses plied on the normal routes in East Majuli. In a place where the communication infrastructure is so poor, the loss of this rudimentary service means hardship to ordinary people - but then they don't seem to count in the scheme of things.

The first of June dawned cloudy, and the island was lashed by the first torrential downpours of the monsoon. The Ahu-dhan was ripe in the fields, and there was little time to be wasted every day the harvest was delayed meant the possibility of losing the crop to the floods. In spite of that, a large crowd turned up, around three hundred persons from all over the island. People came walking and on cycle, to save bus fare. We provided no transport or refreshments. As each one entered the hall, he or she was given a complete report of AVARDs activities in the past one year, an income expenditure statement and the history and objectives of the Avard in Assamese. Charts and posters displaying various activities were displayed along with certificates from the DRDA and the Public Health Engineering Department denying that they had paid any money or pumps to AVARD. The complete report was read out for better clarity. For the first time people experienced a public organisation opening itself to public scrutiny and asking for their opinion about its work.

Speaker after speaker came and spoke highly about the work done by the AVARD - NE team. "They are ideals for us and our children," said Mr. Choudhary. "Far from promoting a culture of dependence, they've shown us what we can do on our own." "Their members had actually filed a police complaint when some Army jawans troubled women in Citadarchuk. In fact I must take up the case with our unit which organised the protest rally yesterday", said a candid Digantar Bora, the Secretary of the Majuli AASU. The Secretary of the Majuli District Branch of the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad (AJYCP), Bhoben Kakoty and the President of the TMPK (the Mising Student Union), Horen Noro also appreciated the good work done for the development of Majuli by AVARD - NE and the way the group had tried to understand the problems of the backward classes.

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Displaying courage and candour, one speaker after another challenged the detractors of AVARD-NE to reveal any evidence of its wrong doings and cautioned them not to make use of the gun to muzzle truth. "Where were these people who are now crying foul of AVARD when atrocities were committed on women. On behalf of all the women of Majuli, the 117 Mahila Samities that we represent, I can say that we unequivocally support AVARD. We will always give full support for its activities," said Anjali Thakur, the secretary of the District Mahila Samiti.

The mood of speakers was clearly defiant. "Public opinions formed at the point of a gun is not public opinion at all," decried an agitated Kishori Mohan Pal, school teacher and journalist. "It is a shame that despite my old age I cannot speak out the complete truth in this atmosphere of fear; yet I would like to say that no other sangathan has done as much for Majuli in such a short time, exclaimed another. Padma Pegu, lecturer in Jengraimukh college ran down the anonymous nature of the charges. "If they were real militants, they wouldn't be afraid of putting their names on the posters and revealing their identity. They must be fake militants."

"These armed men were threatening my men and women colleagues with death for helping an organisation which is working for the development of Majuli, "informed Dilip Phukan from Naya Bazar, who had recently written a daring article in the local press against the environment of terror which was being created by the militants.

One young boy focused on the charge of destroying Assamese culture which was levelled on the organisation and suggested that it would be better for the AVARD - NE women to wear mekhala chador. He was immediately countered by the rest of the public who felt that culture meant much more than only the clothes. Barring this one doubt which was clarified by the public themselves, no one else spoke ill of the organisation. The people who had pressed charges in the poster and also those who presented the memorandum for the ouster of AVARD from Majuli, did not attend the meeting.

The five hour mukoli sabha (open meeting) unanimously adopted a resolution supporting the work done by AVARD, and requested it to continue its work for the development of Majuli undaunted by the obstacles placed by some persons from one particular part of the island.

So is this the end of the story? Unfortunately not. Even today, as I write, people are being threatened and warned off, and it has become difficult for us to work in this atmosphere of tension and fear. Everywhere we go, people are welcoming as before, but seem slightly distant. They all want development and change, but are scared. Three health workers didn't show up for their training programme, pleading ill-health; our landlord has given us notice ("for personal reasons only, please"), one of our Dweep-Alok editors has resigned, again for "personal reasons". It seems an uncanny coincidence, coming in the wake of these events.

Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) is a non-profit registered society formed by the federation of Voluntary Association at the level of State and Union Territories. VHAI links over 4000 grassroot-level organisations and community health programmes spread across the country.

VHAI's primary objectives are to promote community health, social justice and human rights related to the provision and distribution of health services in India.

VHAI fulfils these objectives through campaign, policy research and press and parliament advocacy; through need-based training and information and documentation services; and through production and distribution of innovative health education materials and packages, in the form of print and audiovisuals, for a wide spectrum of users-both urban and rural.

VHAI tries to ensure that a people-oriented health policy is formulated and effectively implemented. It also endeavours to sensities the large public towards a scientific attitude to health, without ignoring India's natural traditions and resources.



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